



LIFE OF AN AMERICAN SLAVE

ADAPTED FROM THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF
FREDERICK DOUGLASS

CAST

NARRATOR	<i>Older Frederick</i>
FREDERICK	<i>Young Slave Boy</i>
GRANDMOTHER	<i>Frederick's Grandmother</i>
HESTER	<i>Frederick's Aunt</i>
MASTER	<i>Frederick's Master</i>
LUCRETIA	<i>Frederick's Mistress</i>
HUGH	<i>Frederick's New Master</i>
SOPHIA	<i>Wife of Hugh</i>
BOY ONE	<i>Street Urchin</i>
BOY TWO	<i>Street Urchin</i>
BOY THREE	<i>Street Urchin</i>
IRISHMAN	<i>Dock Worker</i>

NARRATOR: I was born in Tuckahoe, Maryland. Even to this day, I have no

accurate knowledge of my age. Most slaves know as little about their ages as horses know of theirs. The closest slaves come is the knowledge that they were born during planting-time, harvest-time, spring-time, or fall-time. When I was a child, this lack of information concerning my own age was a source of unhappiness. I asked my grandmother, whom I lived with, why this was so.

FREDERICK: The white children know their ages. Why don't we?

GRANDMOTHER: Hush up. No slave ever knowed his birthday. And you won't neither.

FREDERICK: Maybe the Master would know. I could ask him.

GRANDMOTHER: Not on your life! To the Master it's wrong for a slave to ask that—plumb rude! Shows him you got a restless spirit.

NARRATOR: I could have asked my mother, but from the time I was an infant I had been separated from her. It was a common custom in that region to part children from their mothers at a very early age. The only reason for this I can surmise is that it hinders the natural development of a child's affection toward its mother.

FREDERICK: Where is my mother?

GRANDMOTHER: On another farm. Don't think on it too much. It's the way of things.

NARRATOR: So I lived with my grandmother in a shack at the edge of the

plantation. She was too old to work in the fields any longer, so she took care of any children too young to do field-work like me.

FREDERICK: What is my mother's name?

GRANDMOTHER: Harriet Bailey. A good name! That's why I gave it to her.

FREDERICK: What does she look like?

GRANDMOTHER: Ah, she has the prettiest skin—darker than even me or her daddy.

NARRATOR: I held my arm up to the arm of my grandmother's. Mine was considerably lighter than hers. The sight of this seemed to trouble her, so she pulled her arm away.

My Aunt Hester also lived on the same plantation as us, and she would stop by our shack from time to time.

FREDERICK: *Her* skin is darker than mine, too. Why is mine so much lighter?

NARRATOR: My grandmother and aunt looked at one another.

HESTER: You gonna tell him?

GRANDMOTHER: I ain't never going to speak of such a thing!

NARRATOR: The topic was dropped. It was only later that I learned—through whispers—that a white man was my father. Some even said the Master himself. But the correctness of this opinion, I never discovered.

One night while I slept upon the shack floor, covered up in a feed sack, I felt

someone wrap her arms around me and hold me tightly in the darkness. This person held me for a few hours and then was gone. In the morning I asked my grandmother about the occurrence.

FREDERICK: Who was that?

GRANDMOTHER: Your mama.

NARRATOR: It was true. After the performance of her day's work, my mother had walked the twelve miles between her farm and mine to be with me.

FREDERICK: Why?

GRANDMOTHER: Cause she's your mama. No Master can make her forget that.

NARRATOR: On another night she came in the same way. She held me in the darkness and then rose early enough to walk back to her own farm. I never saw her in the light that I remember.

FREDERICK: Why does she leave before sun-up?

GRANDMOTHER: Cause she works in the fields on her farm. If she's not in the field by sunrise, the overseer will tan her hide.

NARRATOR: Four or five times she came and visited me in darkness. Then one day, my grandmother broke the news to me matter-of-factly.

GRANDMOTHER: I guess it's best you knowed—your mama's dead.

NARRATOR: She had died on one of my master's farms. I was not allowed to be

present during her illness, at her death, or her burial. She was gone long before I knew anything about it.

GRANDMOTHER: How do you feel? Sad?

NARRATOR: I shook my head.

GRANDMOTHER: Hmm.

NARRATOR: I received the tidings of my mother's death with much the same emotions I would have felt at the death of a stranger. The main regret was that she had never given me true information about my father.

FREDERICK: Who is my father? Is he a white man?

GRANDMOTHER: Don't matter none. The child goes the way of the mother.

NARRATOR: I later learned that slaveholders indulged their lusts on their female slaves—making it both pleasurable and profitable. To many slaves the slaveholder is both Master and Father.

FREDERICK: But if a white man was my father—

GRANDMOTHER: Don't say a word of it! The Master's wife don't like slaves like you. She'll make the Master sell you.

NARRATOR: It is true. Many a slaveholder will sell his own children just to appease his jealous and suspicious wife.

One night, after dark, my Aunt Hester was visiting our shack. She was stirring and looking out in the night air expectantly.

GRANDMOTHER: Where you goin'?

HESTER: Out. Maybe the next farm over.

GRANDMOTHER: You're not going to see that Ned Roberts, are you?

HESTER: Maybe.

GRANDMOTHER: What if the Master comes looking for you? He does that from time to time.

HESTER: Don't I know that? That's why I'm goin'! Ned loves me!

GRANDMOTHER: If the Master catches you...

HESTER: It's my choice, mama.

NARRATOR: Aunt Hester went out all the same. And soon after the Master did come looking for her, and she was not in her quarters. At my young age, I wondered why the Master would need her so late at night, but in later years I began to suspect the reason, for Aunt Hester was a woman of noble form and graceful proportions. The next morning, Aunt Hester returned—flushed and angry.

GRANDMOTHER: I knowed it. He done caught you.

HESTER: The Master said I can't go out again, and he better not catch me with Ned Roberts no more.

GRANDMOTHER: At least you didn't get a whippin'.

HESTER: I'm going though. I won't let him stop me. I've got to see Ned!

NARRATOR: So not long after Aunt Hester snuck out again. I happened to be helping my aunt in the kitchen when the Master confronted her about this one day.

MASTER: (*angrily*) Hester! Hester!

HESTER: Quick, Freddy. Hide there in the closet.

NARRATOR: The Master had discovered that my aunt had disobeyed him, and he was a cruel man, hardened by a long life of slaveholding. He took great pleasure in whipping Aunt Hester himself.

MASTER: Come here! I'll teach you to disobey me!

HESTER: (*weeping*) No! No!

NARRATOR: As I watched from the secrecy of the closet, he stripped her from neck to waist—leaving her shoulders and back entirely naked.

MASTER: Cross your hands, you—

NARRATOR: Then he cursed at her like a dog. After crossing her hands, he tied them with a strong rope and led her to a stool under a large hook in the ceiling joist. He made her get up on the stool and tied her hands to the hook. Her arms were stretched up at their full length, so that she stood upon the ends of her toes. Then he cursed her again.

MASTER: I'll learn you to disobey my orders, you—!

NARRATOR: After rolling up his sleeves he commenced to strike her with a heavy cowskin switch, and soon the warm, red blood came dripping to the floor.

HESTER: (*weeping*) No! No! No!

NARRATOR: No words, no prayers from his gory victim seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped. Where the blood ran fastest, he would whip longest. He whipped her to make her scream and then whipped her to make her hush. Not until he was finally overcome with fatigue did he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin.

MASTER: Now, you harlot. That'll learn you.

NARRATOR: I was so terrified and horror-stricken at the sight. I had never seen anything like it. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. After the other slaves had untied my aunt and carried her away, I ran back to my grandmother, weeping.

FREDERICK: Grandma, he could have killed Aunt Hester.

GRANDMOTHER: There ain't no crime in that—for a white man.

FREDERICK: No crime?

GRANDMOTHER: A master near here killed his own slave with a hatchet—spilled his brains. Wasn't no crime for him.

FREDERICK: But—but—

GRANDMOTHER: Your cousin, a girl 'bout fifteen. She tended her Master's baby on the neighboring plantation. One night she was to watch the baby and make sure he don't cry. Well, she was powerful tired, she fell asleep, and the baby started to cry. The mistress came in, took up a stick of firewood, and broke the girl's nose and breastbone. She died. No crime.

NARRATOR: The full knowledge of slavery dawned upon me.

At the tender age of seven I was separated from my grandmother and moved to another plantation owned by Colonel Lloyd.

GRANDMOTHER: Be strong, boy.

NARRATOR: The principal products of my new plantation were tobacco, corn, and wheat—worked by three to four hundred slaves. As I was not old enough to work in the field, I had a great deal of leisure time. I drove up the cows at evening time, kept the fowls out of the garden, and ran errands for Lucretia, my master's daughter. In hottest summer, I was kept almost naked—no shoes, no jacket, no trousers, nothing on but a coarse linen shirt, reaching to my knees. I had no bed. I used to steal a bag, which was used for carrying corn to the mill, and crawl into this bag at night.

At night the other slaves would come in from the fields—sore and worn. They would tend to their cooking, washing, and mending. Then young and old, male and female, married and single, they dropped down upon the cold, damp floor—side by side. There were no beds and barely one coarse blanket.

In the morning the overseer would sound his horn, and woe to the one who did

not respond! All must rise and be off to the field. The overseer, armed with a cowskin switch and a cudgel, would stand by the door of the quarter ready to whip anyone who did not start for the field at the sound of the horn.

Yet even from the earliest of my days, I had the belief that slavery would not be able to hold me forever. This good spirit was from God, and to Him I offer thanksgiving and praise.

About the time I was eight I received news that changed my life. My master's daughter, Lucretia, sent for me.

LUCRETIA: Freddy, you are going to live in Baltimore to serve in the home of one of our relatives. You are to leave in three days' time.

NARRATOR: I could not believe it. Those three days would seem like an eternity!

LUCRETIA: You must go wash. Get all that dead skin off your knees and legs before you get to Baltimore. The people in the city are very cleanly. They will laugh at you if are dirty. And I am going to buy you a pair of trousers.

NARRATOR: I went to the creek and tried to wash off the scurf of the plantation.

For any other child it would have been heartbreaking to leave his home, but my home was charmless. My mother was dead, and my grandmother lived far off.

I remember the day we set sail up the river for Baltimore. I looked back on Colonel Lloyd's plantation for the last time.

If I had never gone to Baltimore, I probably would have lived my whole life in slavery. It laid the foundation for my escape from slavery.